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Memorial Day in the 1920s

by Lauren Pille Robinson

RIVERSIDE, Iowa, observed Memorial Day in the 1920s in the manner of most of America. The purpose of Decoration Day, as it was then called, was to honor the nation's veterans and war dead by decorating graves and holding memorial services. This excerpt from an oral history project focuses on this national holiday and its social customs on a local level — through the words of three Riverside citizens and the photographs of local photographer William Crozier. A concluding essay considers the role photographs play in interviews, and other aspects of oral history.

Delbert Flynn: "[Memorial Day] used to be really the deal. They'd have the band and the color guard and about forty of 'em marching — this was right after the war. And the Civil War vets — I remember when there was five of 'em — they'd have to have them in a car in the parade."



SHS ARCHIVES



Marie Havel: "Everybody took part. I can remember they all lined up. . . . All the little schoolchildren were in the parade, the Civil War veterans — and there were a lot of them — a good many of them had beards . . . old, old men. And the band, and the Relief Corps, and it always came out in force. And they would start way downtown and go up the hill and I can remember walking clear up to the cemetery."

Grace Dautremont: "It was really a full day. And it was *hot*. It seems like it was always a *hot*, burning hot afternoon."





Grace: "Memorial Day wasn't one of those big picnic-eating days. It wasn't a fun day. It was just for remembering the soldiers. We didn't, I think, the week ahead, say 'Oh, goody, it's gonna be Memorial Day.' But when the time came, we went."

Marie: "[We'd have] spirea and early peonies, and . . . iris. *Lots* of flowers, ordinarily. In those days, it seemed like to me, we never had a problem with flowers. I think the climate's changed. Certainly, it's uncertain. I can't ever remember that we didn't have flowers on Memorial Day. We *had* to have them. . . . Everybody was dressed in their best clothes . . . but I don't remember ever wearing a hat. I always had a big hair ribbon on, maybe there was no room for a hat."

Grace: "I guess each one of us had a bouquet. . . . If you didn't have some [flowers at home], you'd go to the neighbors'. And then, also, you could always get wildflowers. Violets would be out — that kind of thing."



Memorial Day 1924
Crozier Photo D.

Delbert: "Then they'd have a little ceremony up to the cemetery, there by the grave of the unknown soldier."

Grace: "I guess there'd be leaders — there'd be some older [schoolgirls] picked out for that. And they would have a couple kids going along [with each leader]. The leader would have their grave picked out for them. And then we'd go and put our flowers on the grave. That's what Memorial Day was created for, to commemorate the soldiers who died."

Delbert: "Everybody went to an observance somewhere. . . . On Memorial Day, like everything stopped. They might have gone to something in the morning and gone back to [work in] the field in the afternoon, but I don't think they'd think about just skipping it altogether. It seems like it generates less and less interest every year. Now, people got cars and money and more fun things to do — or they think they have anyways."



Memorial Exercises
May 31 1926
Riverside Iowa
Photo VI Crozier



Riverside Ia May 30 1921
CROZIER PHOTO 95

Marie: "Boy! All the relations came for Memorial Day and they brought picnics. It was family reunion day. And one of the things I was brought up to do was to make a pilgrimage through the cemetery and *everybody* that was a relative — you went by their grave and your mother told you about them and you dropped a flower on their grave. And, my goodness, *I can remember that*. That's how we got informed about our families and their backgrounds. We did this every year."

Delbert: "There'd be a lot of visiting goin' on. You'd see some of your relations you hadn't seen for a month or two. Like my aunt and uncle in Iowa City, they'd come down here. They had family buried here, you know. They *came* from here."

Marie: "It was such a ritual that I remember the year before my mother died, she said, 'You know, this is the last year I'm going to be able to do this.' She wasn't alive the next Memorial Day."

